

Oxford Symposium on Food and Cookery Oral History Project

Interview with Harold McGee

Interviewer: Dr. Máirtín Mac Con Iomaire

Date: October 2016

I = Máirtín Mac Con Iomaire

H= Harold McGee

Beginning of the interview

I

When was your first connection with the Oxford Symposium of food and Cookery?

H

It was reading about Alan Davidson. I was in the States at the time. This was in the 1980s and I read about this remarkable man in London putting together a book about the science of cooking which is what I was trying to do in the Boston area. So I learned what I could about him. This was pre internet days and it took some effort but I finally did and I learned about the Symposium just from a distance. Then I subscribed to *Petits Propos Culinaires* and there I read a couple of queries of Alan's about the science of actually making meringues. I wrote him a little note saying I thought I had some answers he might be interested in. He wrote back saying "I'm going to be in California shortly and how about we have lunch together"? I met him for lunch, this was 1984, and he was kind enough to ask me to consider being a key note speaker at the 1985 symposium. So that was my introduction to the symposium.

I

Do you remember what the theme was in 1985?

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H

It was a kind of a hybrid subject, cookery books but also science, there was two different elements. So I came and gave a talk and met all these remarkable people, Nicholas Kurti and his wife Jana, Theodore Zeldin of course, so many people. it was a brilliant introduction to what at the time was a very small world of people interested in cookery in a serious way.

I

That was in St. Antony's, how many people would have attended your first meeting, would it have been around 40 or 60?

H

My recollection was that it was somewhere between 50 and 100.

I

Was that your first meeting with Nicholas Kurti and had he coined the term molecular gastronomy at that stage?

H

Well, actually, I met Nicholas before I came to the symposium, in fact Nicholas arranged for my accommodations during the symposium. He put me up in Brasenose College, which was his college. So I met him because he reviewed my book for *Nature*. He did so and then wrote to me saying, 'I'm going to be in the Bay Area and I would like to come speak with you about your book'. This was after the review came out. So I said "of course I'd love to see you". He arrived on a Sunday afternoon about two in the afternoon, we shook hands, he then took off his jacket put it on the back of a chair, we sat down at a table and he grilled me for the next three hours about... he took out a sheaf of paper and said "on page 16 you say this, how can you say that, how do you know that is the case"? Then after three hours he said, "Thank you very much", put his jacket back on and drove away. I wasn't quite sure what kind of impression I'd made on him but he was very welcoming when it came to the symposium itself.

I

It sounds like a *vive voce*, he should have given you a doctorate at the end of it. If we can go back...where did you grow up?

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H

I was born on the East Coast but grew up in the Chicago area so in the Mid-West.

I

Were there many in the family?

H

Four of us in the family, two sisters and a brother

I

What did your parents do?

H

My father was a very early adopter of computer technology so he was helping large companies with catalogues, to put their catalogue information into computerised form to help them make it a much more efficient process and my mother was a homemaker but she had an important influence on the way I look at food. She was born and raised in India. So in the middle of the mid-west I would be walking home with my school mates from school and I would smell curry from a distance and my stomach would begin to grumble and my friends would say 'Ugh what's that'? (laugh)

I

What was her connection to India? What was her ethnicity, where were her parents from?

H

She was born there and her father was British and her mother was Indian. Indian with a few other things thrown in because she was from Mahe on the west coast, so she had some Portuguese and some French as well. But a much more cosmopolitan upbringing than my father had.

I

So your father... when you say pure Chicago that could mean Polish, Irish, German or anything.

H

He was born and raised in Ohio, of Scots, Irish decent. He lived in the Midwest until he went away to school. His father gave him the advice, this was the late 1930s, just to go as far away from home as possible. He went to California, which was as far as you could get and went to school out there.

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I

And what did his father do?

H

His father was a civil engineer.

I

So there's always been that engineering scientific mind. Your brother and two sisters, did they inherit that scientific, engineering mind as well?

H

The older of my two sisters did do a degree in forestry and she actually did the line drawings for the first edition of my book. I couldn't afford an artist and she said she would be happy to do her best. Because she was doing botanical things she had gotten a lot of practice in this and did a wonderful job.

I

Did you go to college in California or did you take your grandfather's advice and go as far away as possible?

H

Actually both, I was growing up in the Chicago area and I could go to California. In fact I went to the same school that my father did which specialised in science and engineering –Caltech. My plan was to be an astronomer until I found out what astronomy means or meant in the 20th century, which essentially meant number crunching, not looking through telescopes and having deep thoughts. I ended up switching to literature and philosophy and got a degree in that at Caltech and went on to graduate school at Yale in literature and wrote a thesis on John Keats, the poet, whose title was *Keats and the Progress of Taste*. Literary taste rather than literal taste.

I

What got you into the science of food?

H

It was a bit of desperation. I'd finished my degree and I wanted to teach poetry and for several years I did but always on one year very short term contracts. Then I didn't see a tenure track position coming my way so I began to think about alternatives. I'd been teaching writing as part of the teaching I was doing and a couple of my mentors at university said you know you have the science in your background, that was an

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important investment and you haven't done much with that, you should go back and tap that, see that you can do with it. I came up with the idea of writing about the science of everyday life, which no one was really doing at the time. There was lots being written about astronomy and medicine but nothing about the day-to-day things and I thought food would be very interesting subject because it's something active. If I wrote about the weather you might know more about clouds but you'd still suffer whatever weather was being visited upon you whereas with cooking if you learn something new about what's going on, you go in the kitchen and you do something a little bit differently and you make a better dish. So it just appealed to me, the subject for that reason. I had no expertise in cooking, I had no expertise in food science. It just seems to me that this was a subject which was really ripe for writing about.

I

It's interesting that in many ways you're a self-taught food scientist in the same way as Heston Blumenthal who is hugely inspired by you is a self-taught chef, which is actually quite interesting. You had the *Curious Cook* written before you came to Oxford.

H

Actually no, the very first book I wrote was '*On Food and Cookery*'.

I

Ah, yes, so you had that written in 84 and then you come here in 85 and actually you had already been grilled by Nicholas Kurti and clearly passed the test because he put you up, got you lodgings. What happened after that, was there any other links you made at Oxford? How did your life move directly after that?

H

Well at Oxford, thanks to Alan, who was very much the presiding spirit of the Meetings, I was introduced to a number of people in publishing and one very concrete thing that came out of it was that I had a British publisher which was wonderful.

I

What did that mean for you, was '*On food and Cookery*' then published in England as opposed to just published in America?

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H

Yes, that's right

I

So it opened up a new audience for you and a few royalties?

H

Yes, a few royalties. It was just that there were so many people here from so many countries who heard me speak and I got to be a bit better known not just here but elsewhere and that was wonderful.

I

Were you invited to speak in other countries based on that?

H

I don't remember the details but I have a feeling I was invited to Australia, we were just speaking to Cherry Ripe and I'm sure she had something to do with that but I really can't remember.

I

What was your next link to Oxford, did you come back the following year or was there a gap before you came back again?

H

What happened was that the British edition of '*On Food and cookery*' came out and it won the André Simon prize that year, this is in 1986 I guess. The prize came with some money, maybe £500 or something like that and my immediate thought was good I can come back to the Oxford Symposium. So that's what I did. I used that money to come back in 87 or 88, gave another talk and again just enjoyed seeing people and keeping those relationships going.

I

And at this stage had you nailed down a bit of tenure or were you still teaching literature or were you teaching science, or doing a bit of both. What was paying the bills?

H

I left the teaching of literature behind completely when I started on food and cooking so that's long gone. I was actually making do with whatever free-lance writing I could get, so I was writing essentially brochure copy for university science departments because I had been writing about science and that was something I could transfer. I helped a very early tech company that was developing a satellite

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navigation system to write their manuals and things like that so anything I could find to pay the bills.

I

What's the next most momentous part of your career, did you start writing '*The Curious Cook*' at this stage?

H

I started writing '*The Curious Cook*' essentially because '*On Food and Cookery*' the very first book was in a way a work of translation. I read what the disciplines of food science has learnt about food over the last few decades and I tried to translate that information into ordinary English and also for the home cook so not industrial matters but small scale production. I realised in the course of doing that there was a lot of was a lot of questions that ordinary home and restaurant cooks had that that food scientists had never bothered to look at because it wasn't worth their while, so I just kept a list of those and when I had a moment I would go into the kitchen and start to do experiments, so my own little food science except I like to call it kitchen science because food science is a discipline with a history and this was something very much off the beaten path so I was doing kitchen science and collected the findings of a few years of that in a book called '*The Curious Cook*'.

I

I know you updated '*On Food and Cookery*' at a later stage, about 15 years ago now?

H

Yes, 2004

I

Was there something in between or were you a full time writer, or where you still writing copy, how did you fund your life, as they say?

H

So the wonderful thing that happened to me and I feel very fortunate in this, at the time that I wrote the first edition there wasn't tremendous interest in it, it didn't sell particularly well but's that's partly because we were just beginning to discover what a fascinating subject food was. Food in the 1970s was not that interesting but the momentum was building for the rediscovery of just how wonderful it is and by the

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time the book was 10 years old there was enough interest that my publisher came to me and asked me to bring it up to date. They saw a big enough market that they would actually pay me in advance to bring it up to date so that was the turning point. Largely students going to culinary school, not their professors, but the students were writing to me saying 'it's so helpful to have your book because when I ask my chef why do I do this, my chef says don't ask questions just do it!'. This change of generations and change of attitudes and a generally developing interest in all things to do with food and drink, I was able to catch that wave. That was just pure luck.

I

You had the finger in the zeitgeist because 18 years ago we started an honours degree programme in the Dublin Institute of Technology and your book was core reading. A lot of the older chefs have retired now and there was that tradition of I'm the master, listen to me and what I can give you. Whereas we very much started out as we're on a journey together to discover and your book was very much part of that philosophy, which was great. You started coming back to Oxford then? I think there was a bit of a gap?

H

Yes, so I got married, I had children, the symposium back then was meeting in September and that's a difficult time for parents who are seeing their children off to school. So I missed several years, I came back in 1997 and loved it very much and then there was another gap of maybe 10 years or so

I

How many kids do you have?

H

I have 2 children, one turned 30 this year

I

And have they gone into the science thing?

H

My son, the 30 year old is a bio chemistry PhD who however between college and graduate school came to me and said 'I know I'm getting into nothing but six years of

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science. I have a summer off between summer and graduate school but what I'd really like to do is go to France and work in the food industry, can you help me?" So something took somewhere along the line. So he ended up having a summer which led me to wonder why he was having it and not me.

I

And your daughter?

H

My daughter is still figuring life out, she's tried a lot of different things, none of them have completely satisfied her so she's still searching.

I

When did you get involved as a Trustee?

H

I became a trustee a couple of years ago. I came back for a symposium and had lunch with Paul Levy, who I've known since the very beginning and he asked me if I'd join the trustees and because the symposium has been so important to me and everything good that's happened to me, I was happy to say yes.

I

You've moved with the times, you have a blog now, your website, tell us a bit about That, how you modernised your working life?

H

It's been a struggle, I do have to say, I do have a website, I have a blog and I think my last entry is a few months old. So I'm still learning to balance the needs of just sitting down and focusing on the writing of the books with keeping people up to date on what I'm thinking and what I'm doing so... haven't struck the right balance yet!

I

Before we finish up, are there any memorable moments that stick out for you from your time at Oxford Symposium?

H

I do remember how very different the meals were. They were by and large not nearly as good as they are predictably are these days. One of the nice things... I think it was the Sunday lunch... was that it was a pot luck so there were things that were quite forgettable also things that had been brought from France, Scandinavia or from

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Ireland that had been made a couple of days before and were completely new to us. Just a wonderful feeling of sharing and explanation. There would be little cards to explain and who to talk to if you had questions and that kind of thing. That was a really lovely side to it.

I

I think the food in St. Antony's was forgettable at some level except for that. I remember the newness of trying a cheese from around the world, which you had never heard of before.

Thanks you very much for speaking to me, it was very informative and entertaining.

End of the interview.